The Avatars of Culture in Website Localization

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the most important cultural aspects involved in website localization by drawing on the data obtained from a number of Iranian website localizers. A questionnaire was given to 18 participants with varied degrees of expertise and experience who worked on website localization projects in either of English ↔ Persian, Arabic ↔ Persian, and French ↔ Persian directions for at least 3 years. The participants of the study were asked to rate as many factors as they perceived crucial in determining the cultural content of websites. Variables as diverse as ideology, pictures, symbols, colors, branding, navigation, and the written content were investigated. The questionnaire measured the importance of cultural variables and the items were evaluated on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A final item asked why the localizers found any of the cultural variables difficult to localize. The results of the study show that ideology, pictures, and symbols were considered to be the most important variables in website localization, while localization of branding was the trickiest. This study emphasizes the unique cultural nature of website localization based on the analysis of the examples provided by the participants.

KeyWords: Website localization, Culture, Translation

Introduction

Localization is defined as "taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold." (Esselink, 2000: 3). As part of the dominant field of localization, website localization has flourished as a reaction to the ever expanding need for more web-based localization environments, starting mainly in the third phase of localization industry, as depicted in table 1 below.

Schäler (2008: 198) has identified three key phases in localization since it emerged as an industry in the mid 1980s.

Table 1 Key phases of localization (adapted from Schäler, 2008)

Phase	Period	Characteristic	Cultural Aspect
I	1985–1995	Initially unstructured	Symbols
II	1995–2005	Structured	Rights
III	2005–Present	Virtual	Values

The *first* phase as he mentions, was characterized by "*ad hoc* solutions to what were then perceived to be *ad hoc* problems (ibid: 198)." In this phase the biggest attraction of localization was the constant change, and the fact that no two projects were ever the same. It proved much cheaper to embark on a new translation project for the second version of a product rather than reusing those features of the first version that had already been localized.

The *second* phase of localization represented "a certain degree of maturity." Some organizations such as the Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA) and the Localization Research Center (LRC) were active in publishing new guidelines and best practices. Meanwhile, the user interface localization platforms and translation memory systems were fundamentally changing the way localization was done (ibid: 198). User interface platforms and translation memory systems were created to help localizers when doing the projects.

The *third* phase of localization is still evolving and, as Schäler (2008: 198) states, "will mainly be characterized by a move from desktop-based to web-based localization environments." He further depicts how the cultural aspect of localization industry has shifted away from symbols in the first phase towards rights and values in the second and third phases of localization (ibid: 199). This shift illustrates the growing importance of cultural aspects involved in website localization.

In order to translate a website or localize it, an extensive knowledge of the local culture is essential, hence the preference for the term website localization rather than translation. To highlight new dimensions introduced to translation by localization, O'Hagan & Ashworth (2002: 66-78) treated localization as "culturalization" of the message, as the word "culture" tends to embrace wider aspects than simply the linguistic issue of converting the text into the target language. Culturalization of the content draws on the knowledge of the target language and cultural conventions relevant to the field to which the text belongs.

Background

A study by Singh et al. (2004) shows that most online users tend to purchase goods and interact through sites that are particularly customized for them in their local language. Moreover, Ferranti (1999) found that more than 75 percent of Chinese and Korean web-users shopped on Mandarin and Korean websites respectively. In a similar fashion, Spanish and French online buyers showed strong preference for sites in their local languages (Lynch, Kent, & Srinivasan, 2001). In general, online users are more comfortable using websites in their local languages and cultures.

A survey by Forrester Research group confirms that non-English language users stay twice longer on localized websites than they do on English-only websites, and business users are three times more likely to buy online when contacted in their local language (Singh & Pereira, 2005). Several studies (Simon 2001; Luna, et al. 2002; & Singh et al. 2004) have highlighted that localized web content increases usability, access, and website interactivity, which lead to more web traffic and business activity on the Web.

When a website is localized its target audience will find it more accessible, usable and culturally suitable. Website localization is a multi-layered activity, which requires both technical expertise and linguistic/cultural knowledge. If either is missing, the localization project will probably encounter problems. In most cases it is the lack of linguistic and cultural input that makes a website localization project less effective.

Still, translating a website into another language is not an easy task. The expression "culturally appropriate" means that one must localize it in a specific society, a group of people who speak their own language, have their own customs and expect goods to be suitable for them. In order to translate a website or localize it, an extensive knowledge of the local culture and history is essential. Such a localizer also needs to be a specialist in the industry and culture of the target texts. As mentioned earlier, that is a further reason why the whole process is called website localization rather than translation.

The importance of website localization is that it is not limited to the text but includes the whole content along with the values, pictures, symbols, brands, colors, and everything to ensure that businesses and companies can reach their target clients with understanding of their needs. Due localization will show the prospective customers that the company understands and respects their language and culture. It is the same as translation of the film titles; they are often completely different from the source ones, as the original titles simply do not fit the receivers in their language.

Nevertheless, when localizing a website, there are several factors that need to be considered in order to deliver highly accurate and culturally customized localizations. In order to investigate the impact of the cultural factors on website localization, the authors of the present study combined both O'Hagan & Ashworth's "aspects" (2002: 66-78) and Singh & Pereira's "rationale" (2005: 23-51) to come up with the variables in the present research:

Values and Ideology

Culture and values are closely intertwined when we regard culture as a body of "shared and attached values". Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) define culture as:

> "… *patterned* ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their *attached values*." (Kroeber A.L. & Kluckhohn F., p. 181; emphasis added)

This definition of culture has profound implications for website localization as the localizer should evaluate the cultural content of the website in terms of patterned thinking and value systems (ideology). A lot of factors must be taken into account. It is necessary to decide how all perceptions, expressions, humor, behaviors, and metaphors could be translated into the target language. Target language alternatives must be found and used in the website localization project.

Here, language plays a vital role. Even the style of the language and the target reader are crucial. When the target audience is supposed to be skilled professionals, the vocabulary, grammar and punctuation must reflect this. If the audience is the casual customer or the youth then a more relaxed tone should be used.

Pictures

The connotative meaning of the images can be very subtle but they have a lasting effect. As most experts agree, pictures or images can also have negative impacts on the viewers. For example, advertising a travel site in a tourist destination using pictures of scantily clad women, club dancing, and drinking alcoholic beverages in a Muslim country would not make it attractive to the mainstream customers.

When portraying pictures of staff, it is logical to customize these to what the target audience will look positively upon. A picture of the director behind a desk in an office will be fine for a seniority respecting society, but for an egalitarian society it is better to show the director mixing with personnel.

Symbols and Graphical Presentations

Definitely, symbols and graphical presentations can cause many problems in localization. Some Western symbols do not always mean the same abroad. A famous example is the use of animals in logos when it can cause shame and further problems. For example, pigs are considered untouchable and even dogs are not very popular in many Islamic countries including Iran and Afghanistan. Graphical icons using fingers and most hand gestures do not have a positive meaning in the Iranian culture.

Colors

No doubt, colors mean different things to different cultures and countries. Colors are full of cultural messages that need to be analyzed in website localization. Choosing the wrong color for your website or background can have terrible consequences, so it is safer to avoid certain colors. For example, in Iran white is the color of both Islam and Zoroastrianism. Red is a symbol of martyrdom and bravery, and green is also the color of Islam. In some East Asian countries people associate white color with mourning. In China red is auspicious and in Western countries, for instance, red represents passion and excitement, while in India it means purity.

Branding

How a particular brand is treated in the localization process is the subtle job of the localizer. There are cases when certain names or brands sound strange or offensive in the target language culture and need re-assessment of naming. As a result, this type of culturalization needs expertise in the commercial fields including the international market research and multicultural advertising, which normally provide advice on very diverse issues rather than immediate translation problems (O'Hagan & Ashworth, 2002: 73).

Written Content

Localization of the written content is important for due transfer of aspects such as dates, currencies, and units of measurement and also for conveying the correct image. For example, question of whether the site should focus on a product or a company are related to this category. When the target culture respects seniority or hierarchy the localizer should provide information on senior members. Website readers may want to evaluate them through information on their professional qualifications, experience and contacts.

Navigation

Many European scripts such as those of English and French are read from left to right and from the top to the bottom. As a result of this, website localization into non-western languages such as Persian requires additional changes in the website layout and in the user interface design. This can also have an impact on the layout through translation. For example, Arabic script languages are read from right to left, including Arabic and Persian while both Japanese and Chinese are read from top to bottom. When translating into Persian for example, we should consider all the variants, i.e. is it aimed at Iranians, Afghans or Tajiks? Most Tajiks who use Cyrillic script for writing cannot read the Arabic script commonly used for writing Persian in Iran and Afghanistan.

The design features may also include such aspects as the position of function buttons that may need to be modified, for example, when used in languages such as Arabic and Persian, which read from right to left, places various buttons on the right-hand side rather than the left and places scroll bars on the left. Ethnographic comparisons of websites reveal certain unique characteristics in terms of non-textual elements. Access to certain pages is also a factor that can be considered as relevant. Highly hierarchical cultures may view a site positively if it is "member only" access, whereas an egalitarian culture may find it disagreeable.

Methodology

The current research is based on a mixed research design, which aims to collect both quantitative and qualitative data regarding the localizers' perceptions of the most important cultural variables of the websites they had localized. The following are the two research questions of the study:

1. What are the rates of the cultural variables that the localizers perceive to be important in website localization?

2. Which one of the cultural variables the localizers perceive to be the most difficult to handle when localizing websites?

The Participants

The participants of the study were a group of 18 Iranian website localizers with varied degrees of expertise and experience who had worked on website localization projects in either of English ↔ Persian, Arabic ↔ Persian, and French ↔ Persian directions for at least 3 years. They were asked to rate as many factors as they perceived crucial in determining the cultural content of websites.

The Instrument

The instrument was a questionnaire developed by the researchers that measured the strength of cultural content and the items were evaluated on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The items focused on whether ideology, pictures, symbols, colors, branding, navigation, and the written content mostly affected a websites' cultural content. The average scores were calculated for each item, and using percentages and frequencies, the variables were categorized in a top-down fashion with the highest priority given to the most frequent and highly averaged items. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability for the questionnaire items was 0.775, indicating high internal consistency of the instrument.

Data Analysis and Results

Based on the analysis of the quantitative data obtained from the participants, tables 2 and 3 below show descriptive statistics for this study:

Table 2 Percentages and average means for cultural variables (N=18)

Cultural Variable	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Average Mean
Value/Ideology	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	33.3%	50.0%	4.33
Pictures	0.0%	0.0%	22.2%	33.3%	44.5%	4.22
Symbols	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	55.5%	27.8%	4.11
Colors	5.6%	22.2%	22.2%	27.8%	22.2%	3.38
Branding	0.0%	27.8%	38.9%	22.2%	11.1%	3.11
Written Content	22.2%	27.8%	11.1%	27.8%	11.1%	2.77
Navigation	11.1%	50%	11.1%	27.8%	0.0%	2.55

Table 2 shows that 50.0% of the respondents strongly believe that ideology (M=4.33) is the most important variable followed by 44.5% of them who strongly believe that pictures (M=4.22) are the second most important variable in determining the cultural content of websites. Symbols (M=4.11) are considered to be the third most important variable in website localization, strongly agreed by 27.8% of the respondents. Colors, branding, written content and navigation follow them respectively.

Based on figures in table 3 below, we can conclude that localization of branding is the trickiest (or the most difficult) of all other variables as perceived by a third (33.3%) of the respondents. Pictures and ideology are placed the second and third variables respectively, while other remaining variables are deemed to be less difficult to localize.

Table 3 Frequencies and percentages for the trickiest cultural variable

Cultural Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Branding	6	33.3%
Pictures	4	22.2%
Value/Ideology	3	16.6%
Symbols	2	11.1%
Colors	1	5.6%
Written Content	1	5.6%
Navigation	1	5.6%
N(total)	18	100%

The analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the participants shows that Iranian localizer have experienced certain problems which are distinct regarding the localization of ideology, pictures, and branding variables. The following is a summary of the examples provided by the participants of the study:

In terms of ideological aspects one Arabic ↔ Persian localizer wrote, "If we are localizing a website for Persian users, we should be careful about transferring certain geographical misnomers that provoke

nationalistic antagonism (e.g. using certain reductions such as "The Gulf = خليج" instead of "The Persian Gulf = خليج فارس" or some misnomers considered disgusting by Iranian web-users)."

A French ↔ Persian localizer mentioned of a case that she had to replace the pictures of women without Islamic hijab (head scarves) with Iranian women in pictures wearing the customary hijab to be used for a house appliances company's Persian website. However, it seems that the regulations for these types of "normalization" of pictures in Iran have become lax quite recently (See, for example: LG's website http://www.lg.com/ir/about-lg).

It was stated by some of the participants that certain symbols which bear ideological or political messages are controversial in Iran including those that are similar to the officially unrecognized religious sects and foreign political groups. In these particular cases, the localizers decided to omit the symbols.

Colors also pose a challenge to Iranian website localizers. The use of blue vs. red color backgrounds has created problems as most commercial websites do not want to be regarded as sponsors for just one of the major football teams in Iran commonly known as The Blues (Esteghlal FC) and The Reds (Persepolis FC).

Finally, most Iranian localizers believe that localization of branding is the trickiest as some brands prefer to choose a completely different name for their products, which sound more familiar and natural to their foreign customers. On the contrary, some prefer or feel obliged to choose a national or Persianized name for their products. For example, Khoshkhab Company that produces mattress in Iran chooses Persian brand names for the local market such as Anahita, Caspian, and Dorsa along with foreign names like Barabbas, Elena and Comfort for international markets.

As a result of this dual strategy to attract both Iranian and foreign customers some companies have a Persian as well as an international brand name such as "هما", which in Persian stands for National Iranian Airline internationally known as Iran Air.

Another example is the case of Aalifard Company, known by its famous drink brand Sunich (سن ايچ), which is usually branded as Sun/ich (with a reference to its use in sun light or sun warmth) while the actual meaning in Azeri language spoken by Iranian Azeri people is "you drink"!

Conclusion

The manifestations or "*avatars*" of culture are overarching and omnipresent in website localization. The examples explored in this study can be regarded as the tip of the iceberg. This paper investigated cultural aspects in website localization first by emphasizing the growing importance of cultural variables involved in the localization industry within the last 30 years and then by drawing on data obtained from a number of website localizers, an attempt was made to prioritize aspects that website localizers should consider when dealing with localization projects. Based on the findings of this study it is concluded that a number of crucial variables have to be taken into account. This indeed requires both technical and extra-linguistic, i.e. cultural awareness on the part of the localizer. The localizer's job is to identify and appropriately cope with these cultural elements that will impact on the successful localization of a website. Further studies must be conducted to focus on the specific strategies that localizer adopt to solve these problems.

Acknowledgements

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